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Mega Churches or Small Groups?

Management consultant, Peter Drucker, and public opinion pollster, George Gallup, Jr., presented contrasting visions of large and small church groups at the Leadership Network conference in Denver this past August.

Robert Buford, chair of the foundation, set the problem by asserting that "there's more similarity between a large Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, or even a nondenominational charismatic church, than there is between any of them and a small church in the same denomination. The mission of the church may be different from that of a particular nonprofit institution, but the management issues are not."

Drucker stated that "large pastoral churches are the healthiest social institutions in this country right now." He went on to say that "nonprofits need management skills far more than do profit organizations, because they have no conventional 'bottom line.' This is particularly true for churches: the well-run churches are way ahead of practically all businesses."

According to Drucker, "people are bored with theology and are turning to 'pastoral churches,' the kind of church that asks, 'What do these people want that we can give?' rather than 'How can we preserve our denominational distinctiveness, our doctrines?'"

"Social Chistianity is contemptuous, and fortunately does not exist the way it once did. People [now] are in church because they want to be, not because it is the socially acceptable thing to do. Large churches are doing what industry used to do 30 years ago: as employers they are helping their employees with emotional and personal problems." Drucker was quick to add that he was dubious about churches assuming too much responsibility in areas where they are not competent, such as professional counseling.

The needs of society are demanding and will continue to be demanding. Drucker advises that congregations consistently ask "Where can we make a difference?" and "How can we serve the mission?" The key questions for pastors or priests to ask are: "What can I do in this organization that nobody else can do? What did the good Lord ordain me for? What are my strengths? Where have I seen results?"

Drucker pointed out that "so many young, educated people are struggling with both ambition and isolation. They need something to offset their intensely competitive, high-pressure, high-stress working environment. This is where pastoral churches are meeting people's needs, and thus are growing in membership."

George Gallup, Jr., while recognizing the vitality of some mega churches, cautioned the participants that "If you remember one thing, remember the importance of small groups as a vital tool of spiritual growth." Much of the success of mega churches is credited to their commitment to having small groups of about 10 people each that meet twice a month. Gallup pointed out that "at a time of acute loneliness and fragmented families in our society, small support groups serve as a powerful antidote to these social ills."

Gallup supported his assertions with research conducted by the George H. Gallup Institute, under a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., which reveals that four Americans in 10 have participated in small support groups. The survey shows that 28 percent of the public is currently involved in such groups that meet regularly and provide caring and support for their members. Another 12 percent have belonged to groups in the past, and an additional 10 percent say they would like to become involved.

"Small support groups can help revitalize churches and synagogues and serve as a vehicle for changing church life from the merely functional to the transformational." The study also showed that six persons in 10 (60%) currently involved in small groups belong to groups sponsored by churches or synagogues.

Gallup commented: "The tremendous potential for both inner personal renewal and social renewal is suggested by the results of this preliminary survey. Large majorities, for example, say that as a result of participation in small groups they are more open and honest with themselves, better able to forgive others, feel closer to God, and are more understanding of persons with different religious perspectives."

God Not Just an Abstract Concept to Teens

Concepts of God extend far beyond mere attestation of belief for most of America's teen-agers. The great majority of teens say they believe God loves them, and a surprisingly high number report they have experienced the presence of God. For Christian teens, the divinity of Jesus Christ is generally undisputed.

Over the years past Gallup Youth Surveys have consistently reported that about 95 percent of the nation's teen-agers believe in God or a universal spirit. The latest survey shows that far from being an abstract concept to teens, the God they believe in is also thought by most (93%) to love them. Very few teens believe either there is no God (2%) or that if there is one, they are not loved by him (2%). The remaining 3 percent of teens say they are uncertain about whether or not there is a God who loves them.

Belief that they are loved by God decreases slightly as teens grow older. Most younger teens under age 16 hold this belief (96%), but among those 16 and older, belief in God's love for them is found among 88 percent.

The belief that they are loved by God appears to reach teens in most walks of life, as measured by their demographical and geographical traits. The belief is highest in the South (96%) and lowest in the East (87%).

All teens who attended religious services during the seven-day period preceding the time of interview, say they did so in the belief that they are loved by God. While those who did not attend probably include many non-regular worshippers, even among the members of this group, 86 percent still believe they are loved by God.

Three teens in 10 (29%) report they, themselves, have personally experienced the presence of God in some manner. An additional 4 percent are not certain if they have ever had such an experience, but two in three (67%) say they never have had the feeling they were in the presence of God.

The incidence of having felt the presence of God rises slightly as teens grow older, from 27 percent among those who are 13 to 15 years of age, to 32 percent among those who are 16 and older.

The greatest frequency of reports of having experienced the presence of God is found among Protestant teens (41%) and young people who attended religious services during the seven-day period preceeding the time of interview (also 41%). By contrast, fewer Catholic youths (27%) or non-attenders (18%) believe they have ever been in a divine presence.

Nearly nine teens in 10 (86%) believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ; that is, that he is either God or the son of God. He is considered to have been another religious leader like Muhammad or Buddha–but not divine–by 6 percent of the teens. A very few teens (3%) hold the opinion that he never actually lived, while 4 percent say they have no opinion on the matter of his divinity or existence.

By definition, all Christians should believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, from whom the very name of their faith is derived, but a few express skepticism. As a result, belief that Jesus Christ is either God or the son of God is held by 96 percent of Protestant teens and 94 percent of Catholic teens, rather than by all, or 100 percent, of the members of these Christian faiths.

Belief in the divine nature of Jesus Christ is highest among teens who live in the South (94%) or Midwest (88%). Comparatively lower levels of belief are found in the West (84%) and East (75%).

Believe God Loves Them

National	93%
Male	92
Female	94
Ages 13-15	96
Ages 16-17	88
East	87
Midwest	93
South	96
West	93
Protestant	96
Catholic	94
Attended church last week	100
Did not attend	86

Personally Experienced God's Presence

National	29%
Male	29
Female	30
Ages 13-15	27
Ages 16-17	32
East	21
Midwest	30
South	33
West	31
Protestant	41
Catholic	27
Attended church last week	41
Did not attend	18

The findings reported in this issue on the religious beliefs of teen-agers are taken from a Gallup Youth Survey study conducted with a national cross section of 513 teens, ages 13 through 17, who were interviewed by telephone.

Teens Often Pray and Read the Bible When Alone!

A popular myth says that teen-agers usually show little interest in religion and only go through the motions of worship and religious study because their parents require them to go to services and Sunday School. The findings of a recent Gallup Youth Survey demonstrate that to the contrary, many teens do not confine their religious practices to formal worship or religious instruction sessions, but also when they are alone will pray or read the Bible at least occasionally.

Three teens in four report praying when they are alone, including 42 percent who say they do so frequently, and 32 percent who occasionally say their prayers when alone. Personal prayer is practiced rarely by 17 percent of the teens, and 9 percent say they never pray.

Private Bible reading is practiced by 13 percent of the teen-agers, and an additional 31 percent say they occasionally read the Bible when alone. One teen in three (32 percent) hardly ever reads the Bible when alone, and 26 percent report they have never done so.

Young women are among those most likely to say they pray when alone (81 percent) or read the Bible privately (51 percent) at least occasionally. By contrast, solitary prayer (68 percent) and Bible reading (37 percent) is less often reported by young men.

Other Gallup Youth Surveys in the past have shown that church attendance and membership usually decline somewhat as young people grow older, but it is significant to note in the survey being reported today that little or no change is found in their private worship practices. Private Bible study is the same for teens of all ages, and private prayer drops only slightly from 76 percent among younger teens who are 13 to 15 years of age, to 71 percent among those who are 16 and older.

Teens living in the South are more likely than those in other regions to say they pray (83 percent) or read the Bible (55 percent) when they are alone. Midwestern teens also often show higher-than-average frequency of solitary prayer (74 percent) and Bible study (51 percent). Prayer drops to two teens in three in the East (67 percent) and West (68 percent), while private Bible reading is even less frequently reported in both the eastern (31 percent) and western (45 percent) regions of the country.

Protestant youth (80 percent) are somewhat more likely than their Catholic counterparts (71 percent) to report private prayer. Reflecting the greater emphasis of their church upon independent Bible study, however, Protestant teens more often than Catholics say they read the Bible when alone, by a margin of 52 percent to 34 percent.

Not surprisingly, teens who attended church during the seven-day period preceding the time of interview were highly likely to have continued praying (87 percent) and reading the Bible when alone (65 percent). Many teens who did not attend church during the period did pray (61 percent), but only one in four reports at least occasional individual readership of the Bible.

Non-white teen-agers are somewhat more likely than whites to engage in solitary prayer or Bible reading. In these respects, non-whites lead whites in prayer by a margin of 85 percent to 76 percent, and in Bible reading by 48 percent to 43 percent.

Students doing above-average work at school also more often report private prayer (78 percent) and Bible study (50 percent).

Among academic underachievers, both prayer (69 percent) and Bible reading (37 percent) are less frequently practiced.

	Pray alone	Read Bible alone
National	74%	44%
Male	68	37
Female	81	51
Ages 13-15	76	44
Ages 16-17	71	44
Protestant	80	52
Catholic	71	34

Most People Start Out in Life Believing in Heaven and Hell

Perhaps it is just another example of youthful optimism, but more of America's teen-agers believe in heaven than in hell. For that matter, younger people are more likely than their elders to believe in both of these concepts of the hereafter.

Nine teens in 10 (91 percent) say they believe there is a heaven where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded. Three percent of the teens are uncertain about whether such a place or state exists, but only 6 percent say they do not believe there is a heaven.

Three teens in four (76 percent) say there is a hell where the wicked are punished. Disagreeing that there is a place of damnation are 17 percent of the teens, while 7 percent are undecided if there actually may be a hell.

Gallup Youth Surveys have shown that comparatively few American teens (29 percent) believe in eastern religion concepts of reincarnation; that is, the belief that the soul or spirit may inhabit other bodies in successive lives here on earth.

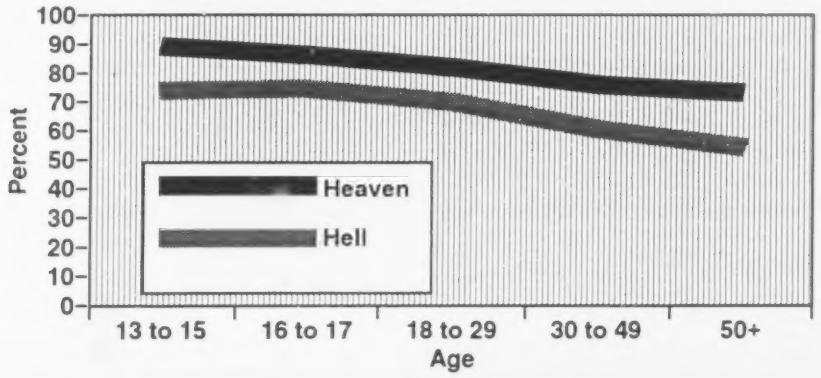
As teens grow older, there is only a very slight drop in their belief in heaven. Among those who are 13 to 15 years of age, 93 percent say there is a heaven, compared to 89 percent of those who are 16 and older. Belief in hell is about the same for both younger (76 percent) and older teens (77 percent). Among adults, belief in the hereafter steadily declines, so that overall, just 78 percent believe in heaven and 60 percent in hell.

Among teens living in the heartland of America, belief in heaven (94 percent) and hell (81 percent) is higher than is found in other regions. Belief in heaven drops to 91 percent of those living in the West and 84 percent among teens in the East. Similarly, fewer western (72 percent) or eastern teens (68 percent) say they need fear a hell.

Religious belief and practice by teens are closely related. Among those who attended religious services in the seven-day period preceding the time of interview, 96 percent believe in heaven and 82 percent say there is a hell. Among non-attenders, belief in heaven drops to 87 percent and hell to 68 percent.

Protestant teens are the most likely of any to believe both in heaven (96 percent) and in hell (82 percent). Slightly fewer Catholic teen-agers believe in heaven (93 percent) or hell (79 percent).

Belief in Heaven and Hell



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Index Shows Religion In America Holding Steady

First reported in the 1990 edition of **Religion in America**, the Princeton Religion Index is an ongoing measurement of eight key religious beliefs and practices of the American public. By combining factors such as belief in God; confidence in religion, the church and the clergy; and church membership levels, an overall picture of religion in America can be obtained. Final figures on these dimensions for 1990 show that the index now stands at 651–just about where it has been for the past three years. A perfect score is "1000," which obviously would be an unobtainable goal reached only when every person in the country made a total commitment to God and church.

The decade of the 1980s saw a slow downward trend in the Princeton Religion Index that bottomed out in 1988 and is remaining steady as we enter the 1990s.

The index reached its peak in the 1950s and actually climbed to 745 by 1960 before the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s took their toll on religion. Futher erosion in religious practices and confidence in church and clergy took place during the 1980s as a result of the televangelist scandals and probably because of various conflicts between laity and church leadership during the period.

The preliminary results in 1991 suggest there may be a new upswing in the index, but this can be confirmed only after the results are reviewed later for the total year. Meanwhile, here is how the eight individual components of the Princeton Religion Index fared in 1990, compared to the past.

• Belief in God or a universal spirit is unusually high in America, with levels of belief ranging from 94 percent to 99 percent over the past five decades.

• Since 1947 nine adults in 10 or more say there is a religious denomination or faith that they prefer. A preference was expressed by 89 percent in 1990.

• Opinion of the relevance of religion or of its ability to answer today's problems has ranged widely over the decades from a high of 81 percent in 1957 to a low of 56 percent in 1984. In 1990, 63 percent of those interviewed felt religion answers today's problems.

• Gallup has been questioning people since 1937 on whether they are now members of a church, synagogue or similar place of worship. Claims of membership have ranged from a high of 76 percent in 1947 to a low of 65 percent in 1988 and in 1990. The recent low measurements in both religious preference and church membership do not necessarily mean that more people are turning away from the church, because there also are indications that many people at this time are "shopping around" for a church.

• Confidence in the church or "organized religion" remained steady for many years, but suffered in the wake of the televangelist scandals in the late 1980s when it dropped from 66 percent of the people in 1985 who said they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence to just 52 percent who still expressed confidence in 1985. Confidence rebounded somewhat to 56 percent in 1990.

• Similarly, members of the clergy have not been immune to the effects of adverse publicity, as positive ratings of their honesty and ethics dropped from 67 percent to 55 percent between 1985 and 1989.

• A majority of Americans in the past 10 years have rated religion as being very important in their lives (53 percent to 56 percent). Occasional measurements on the same quesiton during earlier decades indicated that the sense of importance probably was stronger in the past. In 1990, 56 percent said religion is very important to them.

• Gallup has been questioning people since 1939 about their attendance at church or synagogue in the seven-day period preceding the time of interview. Attendance was higher in earlier years, but during the past 10 years average attendance has shown little fluctuation. In 1990, 40 percent of the adult population could be found at a place of worship during a typical week.

The findings are based on up to 30,233 interviews with representative nationwide samples of men and women, ages 18 and older, taken throughout 1990. For findings based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be one percentage point in either direction. Index figures for some years prior to 1980 are statistical estimates made from existing scattered data.

Princeton Religion Index

Year	Index
1990	651
1989	651
1988	650
1987	662
1986	661
1985	684
1984	669
1983	669
1982	672
1981	681
1980	681
1990	651
1980	681
1970	700
1960	745
1950	739
1940	726

Small Group Participants Report Their Experiences

More open and honest with myself	89%
Feel better about myself	89
Better able to forgive others	86
Helped me to serve people outside the group	85
Have become more open an honest with people	83
Have a new depth of love towards others	77
Better able to torgive self	76
Feel closer to God	74
Helped me to share faith with others	73
More understanding of different religious perspectives	71
Bible has become more meaningful in my life	68
Answers to prayers	60
Healing of relationships	55
Conflict with people in my group	15
Less interested in people outside group	8

See story on page 1 for George Gallup, Jr.'s interpretation of the implications of these findings.

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PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER
47 Hulfish Street
P.O. Box 389
Princeton, New Jersey 08542

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